DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 170 SP 041 555

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TITLE	Focus on an Untapped Classroom Resource: Helping Paraprofessionals Become Teachers.
INSTITUTION	Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, GA.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Southern Regional Education Board, 592 10th Street, N.W., Atlanta, GA 30318. Tel: 404-875-9211; Web site: http://www.sreb.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; *Alternative Teacher Certification; Higher Education; *Paraprofessional School Personnel; Student Financial Aid; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

This report asserts that paraprofessionals are one possible solution to the problem of finding new teachers and keeping them. It focuses on paraprofessionals who work as assistants to teachers and whose duties are performed in the classroom. Paraprofessionals face many challenges to obtaining certification, including balancing family life with returning to school, finding college classes that fit their schedules, and needing tutoring. Finances are one of the main barriers. Financial incentives for paraprofessionals must take their unique circumstances into consideration (e.g., allowing them to attend school part time). Every Southern Regional Education Board state has some type of program for teacher scholarships or forgivable loans. This report lists examples from Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky. Programs include a tuition exemption and stipend program for paraprofessionals and a teacher assistant scholarship fund. Suggestions for states to access this untapped classroom resource include providing financial assistance in the form of scholarships, tuition exemption, or forgivable loan rather than reimbursement; provide financial assistance beyond tuition and fees; and meet other needs of paraprofessionals. A sidebar discusses why researchers recommend paraprofessionals. (SM)

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ED 477 170

Focus *on an Untapped Classroom Resource: Helping Paraprofessionals Become Teachers*

SREB

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April 2003

Southern Regional Education Board

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Attracting and keeping teachers in the classroom continues to be a problem faced by schools across the country. An SREB study on teacher supply and demand shows that 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years.

SREB states have made great efforts to recruit classroom teachers by offering incentives such as signing bonuses and housing assistance to new teachers, providing scholarships for high school seniors and college students who want to become teachers, and even attracting potential teachers from other professions through alternative certification. One possible solution to the problem of finding new teachers and keeping them may already be in the classroom — paraprofessionals.

Who are paraprofessionals? What are their qualifications?

The definition of a paraprofessional and the duties of these school employees may vary by state and even by district. Paraprofessionals may work as media center aides, computer lab assistants or interpreters for students with limited English skills, but many work as teacher assistants (called teacher aides, instructional aides or educational aides in some states) providing instructional support services under the supervision of a teacher. This report focuses on paraprofessionals who work as assistants to teachers and whose duties are performed in the classroom.

While the education and skills required for becoming a paraprofessional vary by state, new requirements were enacted by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) for paraprofessionals working in schools that receive targeted or school-wide Federal Title I assistance (schools with many children from low income families). The new law requires all paraprofessionals working in Title I programs to have completed one of the following: two years of postsecondary education, an associate's degree, or a formal assessment that demonstrates their skills. (Some states and local education agencies have developed or are currently developing their own assessments for paraprofessionals. Other states will use assessments developed by testing companies such as ETS and ACT.) All paraprofessionals hired as of Jan. 8, 2002, to work in Title I programs must meet the above requirements; paraprofessionals hired before that date have until January 2006 to comply.

While some current paraprofessionals are preparing for the skills assessment or are returning to school to satisfy the new requirement of NCLB, others may choose to pursue four-year degrees and become full-fledged teachers.

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The Southern Regional Education Board Focus *series will report on timely education issues.*

How can states help paraprofessionals become teachers?

Researchers indicate that paraprofessionals face many challenges in obtaining certification: balancing family life with returning to school, finding college classes that fit their schedules, or needing tutoring.

However, one of the main barriers paraprofessionals who seek teacher certification face is financial. Paraprofessionals are often older than traditional college students, and many have families. For most, quitting work to go back to school full time is not an option. Even the cost of part-time attendance without financial assistance may put a strain on paraprofessionals.

Although some paraprofessionals may meet eligibility requirements for teacher scholarship programs that have already been established in SREB states, they must compete with undergraduate and, in some cases, graduate students for the same limited funds. In addition, most teacher scholarships require the recipient to be enrolled full time. However, many paraprofessionals need to continue working and are only able to attend school part time.

Financial incentives just for paraprofessionals take their unique circumstances into consideration. For example, initiatives for paraprofessionals are often flexible and support paraprofessionals who can only attend school part time. In addition to funds for tuition, paraprofessionals may be provided with other support, such as stipends during their student teaching to supplement lost income. Initiatives like these ensure that more paraprofessionals will have access to the aid they need and will not be in direct competition with other teacher candidates for scarce financial resources.

What programs are available in SREB states for paraprofessionals who want to become teachers?

Every SREB state has established some type of program for teacher scholarships or forgivable loans. Eligibility varies by program, but participants can include high school seniors with an interest in teaching, undergraduate students and graduate students, teachers with emergency certification, or certified teachers who want to pursue graduate degrees. Currently, only one-third of SREB states specifically target paraprofessionals who want to pursue certification. The table on the following page illustrates what SREB states are doing to help paraprofessionals become teachers.

Specifically, what types of aid are these states offering paraprofessionals?

- In *Louisiana,* the Tuition Exemption and Stipend Program for Teacher Aides and Paraprofessionals provides assistance to help full-time paraprofessionals employed in a public or private school seek an education degree at a public or private institution in the state. The state will pay the tuition and some fees at public universities and will pay a portion of private university tuition (not to exceed the cost of the highest tuition charged at a public university in the state). Teacher assistants must remain employed full time while they work towards the degree, except while completing the student-teaching requirement.

State programs that support paraprofessionals seeking teacher certification

	Type of aid		Service requirement		
	Scholarship/ tuition exemption	Forgivable loan	Must remain employed by school while working towards degree	Must agree to teach in-state after receiving degree	No service requirement; loan is forgiven in exchange for teaching in-state
Louisiana	✓		✓	✓	
Maryland	✓			✓	
North Carolina (4 yr.)	✓		✓		
North Carolina (2 yr.)		✓	✓	✓	
South Carolina		✓			✓
Texas	✓		✓		

Sources: State departments of education, higher education agencies and student financial aid organizations

In addition to the tuition exemption, recipients may receive a stipend while completing the student-teaching requirement; this stipend is intended to offset the loss of full-time income then. Program participants must agree to teach for at least two consecutive years in a public school upon receiving certification.

- During the 2002 legislative session, *Maryland* expanded eligibility for the Maryland Teacher Scholarship to include students who attend part time. Teacher assistants are eligible for the scholarship and may attend school on a full-time or part-time basis. Award amounts range from $1,000 to $5,000 per year depending on enrollment status and whether the recipient attends a two- or four-year institution. Recipients must fulfill a one-year service obligation for each year the scholarship was received.

- The *North Carolina* Teacher Assistant Scholarship Fund program provides funds for teacher assistants to pursue education degrees at a four-year public or private institutions in the state. The award provides up to $4,800 per academic year ($1,600 per semester) for teacher assistants who are employed full time in the state's public schools. Scholarship recipients are not required to teach in the state upon certification. However, they are required to remain employed full time as teacher assistants while they work towards their degrees.

- Another program in *North Carolina*, the Teacher Assistant Scholarship Loan, provides scholarship loans for teacher assistants to attend two-year colleges in the state. Two groups are eligible to apply: current teacher assistants who have a minimum of one year of experience and former teacher assistants who have a minimum of five years of experience but whose positions were eliminated. Paraprofessionals who take a college transfer program with the intent of pursuing an education degree at four-year institutions may receive up to $3,500 annually. Teacher assistants who pursue associate degrees useful in a school setting (such as two-year degrees in early childhood education) may receive up to $1,200 each year in forgivable

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loans. Award recipients must remain employed as paraprofessionals while attending college and must work one year in a public school in the state for each year the scholarship loan was received. Recipients who owe four years of service may only fulfill three years of service if they teach in a low-performing school.

- Instructional assistants in *South Carolina* who have worked for at least three years in a public school may be eligible to participate as "career changers" in the state's Teacher Loan Program. "Career changers" may borrow up to $15,000 each academic year, but no more than a total of $60,000. While the program does not have a service requirement, the loan must be repaid if the borrower does not enter the teaching profession in a region or field with a critical shortage of teachers. The loan is forgiven at a rate of 20 percent or $3,000 per year (whichever is greater) if the person teaches in a subject or a geographic area in which there is a critical shortage of teachers. For those who teach in *both* a critical subject and a geographic shortage area, the loan will be canceled at a rate of 33 percent or $5,000 per year.

- In *Texas*, the Educational Aide Exemption program provides funding for paraprofessionals and certain substitute teachers to pursue education degrees at public postsecondary institutions in the state. Two groups are eligible: school employees who have worked as educational aides for one school year within the last five, and substitute teachers with at least 180 days of substitute-teaching experience within the last five years. Recipients may receive funds for tuition and required fees at four-year universities or two-year colleges (provided they intend to transfer to a four-year school for an education degree), and they must remain employed by the school district in some capacity while receiving the award.

- During the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 school years, both *Florida* and *Georgia* offered incentive programs for paraprofessionals to seek teacher certification. Georgia's PROMISE II Teacher Scholarship Program provided one year of academic support to paraprofessionals. However this support was limited to paraprofessionals who were employed during the 1999-2000 school year (a year some paraprofessionals were affected by budget cuts). Florida's Instructional Aide Scholarship Program provided tuition reimbursement for paraprofessionals who pursued certification in critical subject shortage areas. However, neither program is currently funded.

- During the 2002 legislative session, *Kentucky* authorized, but did not fund, a program to assist certified teachers obtain additional certification in areas of critical shortage and to help personnel with emergency certification and paraprofessionals become certified teachers.

What can your state do to access this untapped classroom resource?

- ***Provide financial assistance in the form of a scholarship, tuition exemption or forgivable loan rather than reimbursement.*** One of the main obstacles paraprofessionals face in becoming certified teachers is financing college. Many paraprofessionals may not be able to pay tuition and wait for reimbursement. Support paraprofessionals through financial incentives that provide funding up front and ensure program retention through service requirements.

- ***Provide financial assistance beyond tuition and fees.*** Paraprofessionals in states that provide forgivable loans, like South Carolina, may use funds borrowed for school-related expenses beyond tuition, such as books and child care. Stipends specifically for books or supplies are another way to help paraprofessionals offset expenses.

- ***Continue assistance through the student-teaching experience.*** In addition to tuition waivers, paraprofessionals in Louisiana may receive stipends to supplement lost income during the student-teaching experience.

- ***Meet other needs of paraprofessionals.*** Researchers have indicated that financial barriers are not the only hurdles that paraprofessionals must overcome. State and local education agencies can work with local colleges and universities to offer evening, weekend and summer classes — and even distance-learning courses — for paraprofessionals. Other efforts can include helping paraprofessionals with preparation for college-entrance and teacher-preparation exams; with mentoring and tutoring; and with child-care arrangements and expenses.

Why researchers suggest paraprofessionals...

For a number of years now, some researchers and educators have been focusing on paraprofessionals as an untapped resource of future classroom teachers. Why?

✓ ***Paraprofessionals who become teachers may have high retention rates.***
One program, the Pathways to Teaching Careers Program sponsored by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, has reported great success with paraprofessionals who became teachers. The Pathways program recruits prospective teachers from nontraditional sources and provides them with financial assistance and other support as they work towards traditional teacher certification. An evaluation of the program revealed that more than 80 percent of paraprofessionals who had graduated from the program were still teaching after three years.

✓ ***Paraprofessionals may be able to help with critical shortages.***
The Pathways to Teaching Careers Program evaluation found that of paraprofessionals who graduated and were still teaching after three years, nearly 90 percent were teaching in urban areas.

A National Education Association (NEA) survey of members in educational support revealed that more than 70 percent of paraprofessionals work with special education students. Other researchers show that bilingual paraprofessionals would be good candidates for teaching in bilingual education or working as teachers of English as a Second Language.

✓ ***Many paraprofessionals are already rooted in the community.***
The NEA survey found that three out of four paraprofessionals lived in the school district where they work and had lived in the area an average of 25 years. Other researchers indicate that many paraprofessionals are rooted in the community and are often familiar with the language and culture of the students.

✓ ***Paraprofessionals may diversify the pool of teacher candidates.***
A recent SREB report, *Spinning Our Wheels: Minority Teacher Supply in SREB States*, indicates that only 21 percent of teachers in SREB states are minorities, compared with 43 percent of students. A report from Recruiting New Teachers found that the majority of paraprofessionals in teacher education programs were minorities.

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For more information:

Louisiana Tuition Exemption and Stipend Program for Teacher Aides and Paraprofessionals: www.doe.state.la.us/DOE/asps/home.asp?I=CERT

Maryland Teacher Scholarship: www.mhec.state.md.us/SSA/MDT.htm

North Carolina Teacher Assistant Scholarship Fund (program at four-year colleges and universities): www.ncseaa.edu/tas.htm

North Carolina Teacher Assistant Scholarship Loan (program at two-year colleges): www.ncpublicschools.org/scholarships/taschol.html

South Carolina Teacher Loan Program: www.slc.sc.edu/PARENTSTUDS/wp154.htm

Texas Educational Aide Exemption: www.collegefortexans.com/cfbin/tofa2.cfm?ID=38

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